In his best-selling book “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference,” author Malcolm Gladwell examines the extraordinary situation that occurs when ideas or products reach the “tipping point,” that overnight phenomenon when they go from near-extinction to nationwide celebrity. In a recent edition of the Harvard Business Review, authors W. Chan Kim and Renee A. Mauborgne examined the Tipping Point phenomenon as it relates to organizational leadership. Tipping Point Leadership is a method of leadership that inspires an organization to produce spectacular results despite the hurdles of competition, public opinion, budgetary constraints, or past performance. Applying the principles of the Tipping Point Leadership method to practice management can result in breakthrough levels of success.

While it may seem strange to look to the Police Department for a model of management success, the impressive results produced by William Bratton during his tenure as police commissioner of New York City serve as an excellent example of Tipping Point Leadership in action. In the early 1990s, Commissioner Bratton took on the management of one of the most notoriously ill-managed police departments in the nation. An out-of-control budget, vast workforce, and public image of an unsafe, crime-ridden city were only some of the odds stacked against him. Crime had gotten so out of control that it was common for the media to refer to the city, famous as the “Big Apple”, as the “Rotten Apple”. However, in less than two years, with zero increase in the department’s budget, Bill Bratton turned New York into the safest large city in the country.

More impressive than the results Commissioner Bratton produced are the long-term changes he created in the NYPD that continue to exist long after his involvement with the department came to an end. Years later, crime rates continue to fall and New York is consistently ranked among the safest large cities in the United States. A turnaround of this magnitude would be admirable for any leader, but for Bratton, it is only one of many successes in his 20-plus year long career.

What is the secret to how Bratton produces these enviable results? As a practice management consultant and CEO, I am fascinated by what triggers high performance in a practice and by what can suddenly bring an ailing practice back to life. Most practice managers only dream of pulling off performance leaps on the scale that Bratton delivered. But what makes Bratton’s turnarounds particularly worthy of study is that his approach to achieving high performance and overcoming the hurdles to success standing in his way are extremely consistent. This is good news, as it means that the consistent results he produces are not a matter of personal charisma but the application of a reproducible system. By examining Bratton’s leadership method, we can learn his technique and by applying it to the challenges of practice management, have the potential of replicating his successes. We can learn Tipping Point Leadership.

Break Through the Hurdle of Awareness

One of the things that people hate most is change. It’s been said that the only individual who loves change is a baby with a wet diaper! As a practice manager, one of the toughest battles you will confront is to simply get your practice team to agree that a change is needed. It may also be difficult for you to accept the undeniable fact that in order to produce consistent success in practice you too must change. Many practitioners decide that it’s time to change after reviewing their practice’s statistics. The number of new patients may be down, patient visit average low, or the collections percentage flagging. They attempt to rally their staff by focusing on the numbers and insisting that the practice team achieve better ones. An important lesson in the Tipping Point Leadership method is that messages communicated through numbers seldom inspire change.

Tipping point leaders don’t rely on numbers to break through their practice’s hurdle of awareness. Instead, they put their practice team members face-to-face with the practice’s operational problems so that they cannot evade the reality of the situation. Poor performance becomes something team members witness rather than hear about. Communicating in this way means that the message – performance is poor and needs to be fixed – sticks with your practice team members. This is essential if they are to be convinced not only that a change is necessary but, that it is something they can achieve.

Police Commissioner Bratton required all police transit officials – beginning with himself — to ride the subway to work, to meetings, and at night. With the ugly reality of the unsafe subways staring them in the face, the transit force’s senior managers couldn’t deny the need for a change in their policing methods. If your practice is struggling with a high rate of missed appointments, show your team the effects that occur when...
patients chronically neglect their health. Review the files and x-rays of patients who didn’t seek care for their condition until it became a crisis. Point out the devastating effects of neglect on the body that occur after years of degeneration and deconditioning. Confronted with the reality of what they are empowered to prevent, your practice team will approach patient appointment management with newfound inspiration.

Sidestep the Resource Hurdle

Once you and your practice team accept the need for change, you may be faced with the stark reality of limited financial resources. One consequence of producing less than excellent results in the past is that your practice is most likely facing a cash-crunch. Do you have the financial resources for the changes that are necessary? Most practice managers do one of two things at this point. They trim their ambitions, dooming their practice to mediocrity at best and demoralizing their practice team members all over again, or they divert their attention to obtaining additional resources through banks, credit lines, or loans. Obtaining outside funding is a time-consuming process and diverts attention away from your practice’s underlying problems.

These traps are completely avoidable. Leaders like Bratton know how to reach their organization’s tipping point without extra resources. They know that they can achieve a great deal by wisely prioritizing their current resources. Tipping Point Leaders concentrate scarce resources in those areas that are most in need of change and that have the biggest possible payoffs. Healthcare providers are drawn to the latest quick-fix scheme like moths to a flame. Countless dollars are wasted on promises of the “next new thing.” The fundamentals of practice growth and management are the same today as they were in the past and will be tomorrow. New patients are the result of contacts. The more contacts you make with potential new patients, the greater the likelihood that they will purchase your services. Improved patient visit average results from making solid recommendations to your patients and pre-scheduling their visits. Increased collections come from proactively working the phones and not hoping that the check is in the mail. Improvement in each of these areas can be achieved through low or no-cost strategies. As your results in these areas improve, you can devote your newly gained financial resources to expand your marketing and public relations efforts through more capital-intensive tools such as print advertisements, direct mail, and the Internet.

Jump the Motivational Hurdle

Creating awareness among your practice team members of the need for change and how it can be achieved with limited resources are necessary steps to reach your practice’s tipping point. However, if change is going to become permanent, your team members must not only acknowledge what needs to be done, they must also want to do it. Most practice managers recognize the importance of motivating their team to make changes, but they may not know where to start. One way to do this is by identifying the areas where your team members are most successful. This can help you set clear performance expectations and motivate them to achieve their goals.

One way Bratton solves the motivation problem is by singling out the key influencers in the organization. These influencers act like kingpins in bowling: When you hit them just right, all of the pins topple over. Single out your key influencers and work with them to achieve the changes you want to see. By identifying and supporting your key influencers, you can increase the chances of making lasting changes in your practice.

The greatest challenge in applying this kind of motivational device is ensuring that your practice team members feel that it is fair and seeing it that they can draw lessons from both good and bad results. This process increases your practice team’s collective strength and each team member’s chance of winning. Address the issue of learning by insisting that all team members play an active role in meetings and being an active moderator yourself. Team members can discuss their achievements or failures without feeling that they are showing off or being shown up. It is imperative for you to create a “safe space” for your team.

Knock Over the Political Hurdle

Politics are an inescapable reality in every organization, including healthcare practices of all sizes. Never forget the plotting, intrigue, and politics that can be involved with implementing a change. Even if your practice team has reached the tipping point, there may be individuals with vested interests who could resist impending reforms. And the more likely change becomes, the more fiercely and vocally these negative influencers may fight to protect their position. Identify and deal with naysayers early on. Unconfronted opposition can seriously damage and even derail the change process. Augment your efforts by enlisting the help of your other practice team members. This can help ensure that your practice team is working together towards a common goal.

About The Author

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